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Scientists close in on tungsten as cause of Fallon cluster

FALLON, Nev. (AP) -- The metal tungsten is emerging as the prime suspect in a childhood leukemia cluster in this small agricultural and military town 60 miles east of Reno, two researchers said.

University of Arizona scientists Paul Sheppard and Mark Witten said their recent tests show that Fallon has up to 13 times more tungsten in its dust than other Nevada cities.

Tests also have found elevated levels of tungsten in tree rings in Fallon and three other towns with leukemia clusters, including Elk Grove, Calif., they said.

While the findings are not conclusive, the scientists said, they justify more research on tungsten's possible role in childhood leukemia.

Since 1997, 17 children with ties to Fallon have been diagnosed with leukemia and three have died.

"It's all beginning to fall into place," Witten told the Reno Gazette-Journal. "There are still many questions to be answered and we're pursuing those, but we're closing in on the culprit. I think we are halfway there."

Last year, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that its 18-month study failed to find a cause for the Fallon outbreak.

But the CDC found that Fallon residents have higher concentrations of tungsten in their urine and drinking water.

Fallon residents remain under a CDC warning to avoid drinking local water until the health effects of tungsten are known.

The CDC and other health agencies said they had done all they could to find the cause of the outbreak and no more environmental studies were necessary.

But some scientists and families of Fallon leukemia patients disagreed and called for further research.

The families formed a group called Families in Search of Truth (FIST), and said determining the source of the town's high tungsten levels was a top priority.

"FIST, with the help of U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, has secured a substantial amount of financial grants to continue looking into unanswered questions, such as what form the Fallon tungsten takes ... and the specific sites where the element is

found," said group spokesman Jeff Braccini, whose 6-year-old son, Jeremy, is recovering from leukemia.

Scientists said they don't know why Fallon has higher tungsten levels than other communities. The metal was mined across northern Nevada, but Yerington and other towns with lower tungsten levels are closer to known tungsten deposits.

Witten and Sheppard plan to visit Fallon again next month to collect samples in an effort to determine the source of the high tungsten levels in the air. They also plan more tree-core sampling for heavy metals.

Witten and Sheppard hail a recent peer-reviewed study published by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences that concluded tungsten-cobalt alloy implants rapidly caused cancer in all lab rats tested.

The study conducted for the Army noted Fallon's high tungsten levels and the presence of both cobalt and uranium in the area's environment.

"Although no definitive link between high tungsten levels and cancer has been established," the study concluded, "further study of the health effect of tungsten and tungsten alloys are clearly indicated."

Witten and Sheppard said they are excited other scientists are confirming their suspicions about tungsten.

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